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THE PHILIPPINES

Casey: A Message for Marcos

CIA Director William Casey is back from a three-day visit to the Philippines. NEWSWEEK has learned that Casey talked with President Ferdinand Marcos about the idea of a new presidential election. The message to Marcos was clear: Washington was pushing for some form of early test at the polls.

In reply, a senior Philippine official let it be known that Marcos might be willing to put his job on the line well before his six-year term expires in 1987. Senior opposition leaders called for an election "to defuse the explosive situation of the country today and restore real democracy." Marcos said he would oppose holding a presidential vote to coincide with gubernatorial and mayoral elections next January. He called the idea "a deceitful way of cutting . . . the term of the president." Whether he could withstand the U.S. pressure was uncertain.

NEWSWEEK has learned that in an unpublicized meeting at Malacañang Palace, the American intelligence chief suggested that an early election could help ease the country's political, security and economic crises. He raised some points designed to encourage Marcos to rethink his objections. Among them was the opinion that an election could help rebuild confidence in the country's political machinery and woo potential investors to repair its devastated economy. A free and open election would restore political normalcy in the country, Casey reportedly said, and thereby reduce the attraction of the communist New People's Army and other radical groups.

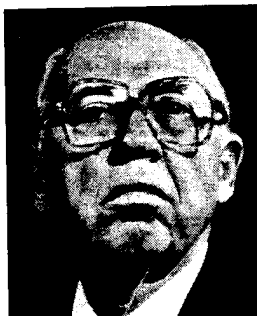
Casey's primary mission, according to sources, was to assess the growing strength of

the nation's communist insurgency. But Casey sounded out several opposition leaders as to whether a vote would "cool the insurgency down"; according to one Marcos critic, he was told it would. And while insisting that the United States was not pressuring Marcos, senior U.S. diplomats in Manila asked at least one party leader whether the opposition could be ready for a vote this year.

Incapacitation: According to Malacañang sources, the CIA director also discussed Marcos's failing health and the possibility of a chaotic succession struggle. Under a new constitutional amendment, the vice president would succeed the president in the event of resignation, death or incapacitation. But that office will not be filled until the 1987 elections. Sources told NEWSWEEK that, after suggesting that the country might need a vice president sooner rather than later, Casey asked—"with due respect"—whether Marcos felt certain he would survive until the next presidential vote. The 67-year-old Marcos, who suffers from a kidney disease, said "yes."

Filipinos who believe that Marcos may support the idea of an early election say he might want to see his wife, Imelda, installed as president or in the vice presidency as his constitutional successor before his health worsens. The president, they say, also knows that there are good reasons for risking an election soon—before the economy deteriorates further or his fractious opposition can regroup. The next move belongs to Marcos—but mounting pressure from his opponents in Washington may force his hand.

RICHARD VOKEY in Manila



The chief: Pressure